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Draft report

Chapter III

General debate

Rapporteur: Sheree **Chambers** (Jamaica)

1. Statements in the general debate were made by the following States members of the Committee on Information: Algeria, Angola, Argentina, Bangladesh, Benin, Brazil, Chile (on behalf of the States Members of the United Nations that are members of the Rio Group), China, Cuba, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Israel, Jamaica, Japan, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Mexico, Pakistan, Peru, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation, Senegal, Spain (on behalf of the States Members of the United Nations that are members of the European Union), the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Thailand, Tunisia, the United States of America, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), Yemen (on behalf of the States Members of the United Nations that are members of the Group of 77 and China) and Zambia. The representative of the Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine, in its capacity as observer, also made a statement. The general debate was preceded by statements made by the Chair of the Committee and the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information of the Department of Public Information of the Secretariat.

2. In taking up the substantive questions before the Committee, speakers emphasized the central role of the United Nations in global affairs and of the Department of Public Information as its public voice. One speaker, addressing the Committee on behalf of a large group, said that his group believed that close cooperation and partnership between the Department and the Committee on Information had always been the cornerstone of the Department's public information policy. Describing the Department as a public voice to promote the purposes and

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image of the United Nations, he called for the strengthening of the partnership. The Organization was a universal forum where the world community could hold debates on many concerns. Many countries, however, especially in the developing world, lacked the resources and the technical means to access information on United Nations activities and achievements. The Department therefore had a challenging task in reaching the widest possible audience on issues of particular interest to the Group. Such issues, according to the speaker, included: decolonization; peacekeeping; disarmament; human rights; sustainable development; poverty eradication; climate change; the Millennium Development Goals; dialogue among civilizations; the follow-up to the World Summit on the Information Society; and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

3. Another speaker, also addressing the Committee on behalf of a large group, said that the mission of the Department was to broaden understanding of the work of the United Nations among the widest possible audiences. The role of the Department, and consequently that of the Committee on Information, was to reach the international public with information on challenges that could be jointly identified and measures that everyone could agree on.

4. One speaker, representing a large group, noted that the members of his group widely recognized the valuable efforts of the Department in promoting and achieving a better understanding of the objectives and the work of the United Nations on a variety of issues of high importance and interest to the international community. Another speaker acknowledged that the Department had helped to make many United Nations activities a resounding success. Her country continued to encourage the head of the Department to identify ways to improve coordination, efficiency and integration of public information activities throughout the Organization, and welcomed his efforts to achieve "the greatest public impact with the greatest efficiency".

5. Several speakers discussed the role of new information and communications technology, including new media, in promoting the work of the United Nations. One speaker remarked that information was no longer bound by traditional borders, which was why his country supported the Department's expansion into new mediums and technologies. According to another speaker, while the dizzying revolution of information and communications technology had greatly contributed to understanding of United Nations endeavours, "it was necessary to strike a balance between traditional and new communications media so as not to accentuate disparities between the North and South". He emphasized that in Africa, vast segments of society drew no benefit from the rise in new technologies, and for this reason, the Digital Solidarity Fund, the main instrument for closing the North-South digital divide, should have greater visibility. Another speaker called for the establishment of a new world order of information for the purpose of creating a fairer and more equitable world based on mutual respect underpinned by United Nations principles. Disseminating a culture of peace, tolerance and dialogue between civilizations in bringing about and maintaining peace was particularly important. Another speaker, while supporting the continued advance of information and communications technologies, suggested that "a code of conduct" should be designed to regulate information flows, "because media could be misused as a tool for expansionist policies and the promotion of certain cultures to the detriment of others". Another speaker stated that his group emphasized the importance of continuing the use of traditional media in disseminating the main messages of the

United Nations as this was still the primary means of communication in many developing countries.

6. Several speakers emphasized the importance of freedom of the press and the freedom of expression. One speaker, representing a large group of countries, observed that it was of paramount importance for all Member States to adhere to their commitments to guarantee full respect for the freedom of expression and access to information and to ensure the unhindered freedom of the press. Another speaker, noting that 3 May was World Press Freedom Day, emphasized that it was important for the Committee to recall article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirmed the right of everyone to freedom of expression, including the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

7. Many speakers emphasized the need for achieving linguistic parity in the work of the Department. One speaker, speaking on behalf of a large group, pointed out that the Secretary-General in his report to the Committee had acknowledged that there was a possibility of a growing gap in the use of Spanish on the United Nations website as compared to English. Noting that one of the most important goals for his group was to achieve parity among the six official languages, he called for the dissemination of information, particularly over the radio, in as many languages as possible, including Portuguese. Another speaker, echoing these sentiments, noted that in order to ensure that people were reached all over the world, it was important for the United Nations to broadcast information, not just in the six official languages, but also in other languages. Another speaker observed that in order to achieve parity among the official United Nations languages, the Arabic section should be placed on equal footing with the others through a strengthening of its work. He also expressed deep concern about the decline in the use of Arabic, particularly in radio broadcasts, as those were an important tool in disseminating the Organization's media messages in villages, communities and regions that did not have access to complex technical media. One speaker also lauded the United Nations information centres for producing information in some 80 local languages and United Nations Radio for producing programmes in Bangla, Hindi and Urdu, among other languages.

8. Several speakers underscored the importance of closer cooperation between the Department of Public Information, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Department of Field Support. One speaker, noting that his country was the largest troop-contributing country, said that while peacekeeping was challenging it also had success stories which should be shared with the world. Another speaker, acknowledging the Department's work in promoting the work of United Nations peacekeeping, called for sustained and improved effort to more effectively communicate to the public, particularly in troop-contributing countries, the important role of peacekeepers in maintaining the peace in conflict areas. Another speaker, also calling for a sustained focus on peacekeeping operations, noted that the Department's increased communications capability had helped to inform Member States of Haiti's needs after the earthquake and had guided the participation of Member States in the response. He also lauded the Department for coming out with a steady stream of media releases targeting audiences in more than 30 troop-contributing countries.

9. Several speakers commented on the Department's special information programme on the question of Palestine. One speaker, representing a large group, said the programme was meaningful to his Group. Commending the Department's annual training programme for Palestinian media professionals from the Occupied Palestinian Territory, he reiterated the need for the continuation of those and other activities, and called for their further enhancement. One speaker noted that until recently the "Question of Palestine" had been a distinct link on the United Nations home page, but it had been removed and replaced by the "Situation in the Middle East" on the home page, news pages and news focus pages. He hoped the Department would consider restoring the original link on the United Nations home page. Another speaker encouraged the Department to keep addressing the plight of Palestinians, bearing in mind the suffering of those people.

10. Most speakers commended the work of United Nations information centres and called for their operations to be strengthened. One speaker, addressing the Committee on behalf of a large group, noted that his Group saw the information centres as vital entities in bridging the gap between developed and developing countries in terms of access to information and communications technology. The Group underlined that any decision pertaining to the reorganization of the centres must be made in close consultation with host countries and must take account of the geographical, linguistic and technological characters and needs of different regions.

11. Another speaker, also representing a large group, welcomed steps taken towards cooperation among the United Nations information centres worldwide, which held a promise of savings without limiting capacity to pay attention to local specifics. In that regard, he looked forward to seeing further progress in multilingual activities of the information centres. He noted that the current capacity of the centres in disseminating information in local languages was an impressive example and should be built on in a cost-effective manner, including through partnerships with non-governmental organizations and academic institutions. Several speakers also welcomed the establishment of a centre in Luanda to address the needs of Portuguese-speaking African countries. According to one speaker, the establishment of the centre would be an important stimulus to peace consolidation in Angola, and could also serve to strengthen democracy and battle poverty and social exclusion.

12. The budgetary constraints faced by the United Nations information centres were also addressed by some speakers. One speaker, calling upon the Department to "strengthen, and not weaken" the information centres, emphasized that adequate budgetary resources must be made available to strengthen public outreach and ensure the effective functioning of the network. Another speaker encouraged all Member States in a position to do so to offer rent-free premises for the information centres.